

(Re)Thinking Dewey, democracy and educational purposes for the 21st century

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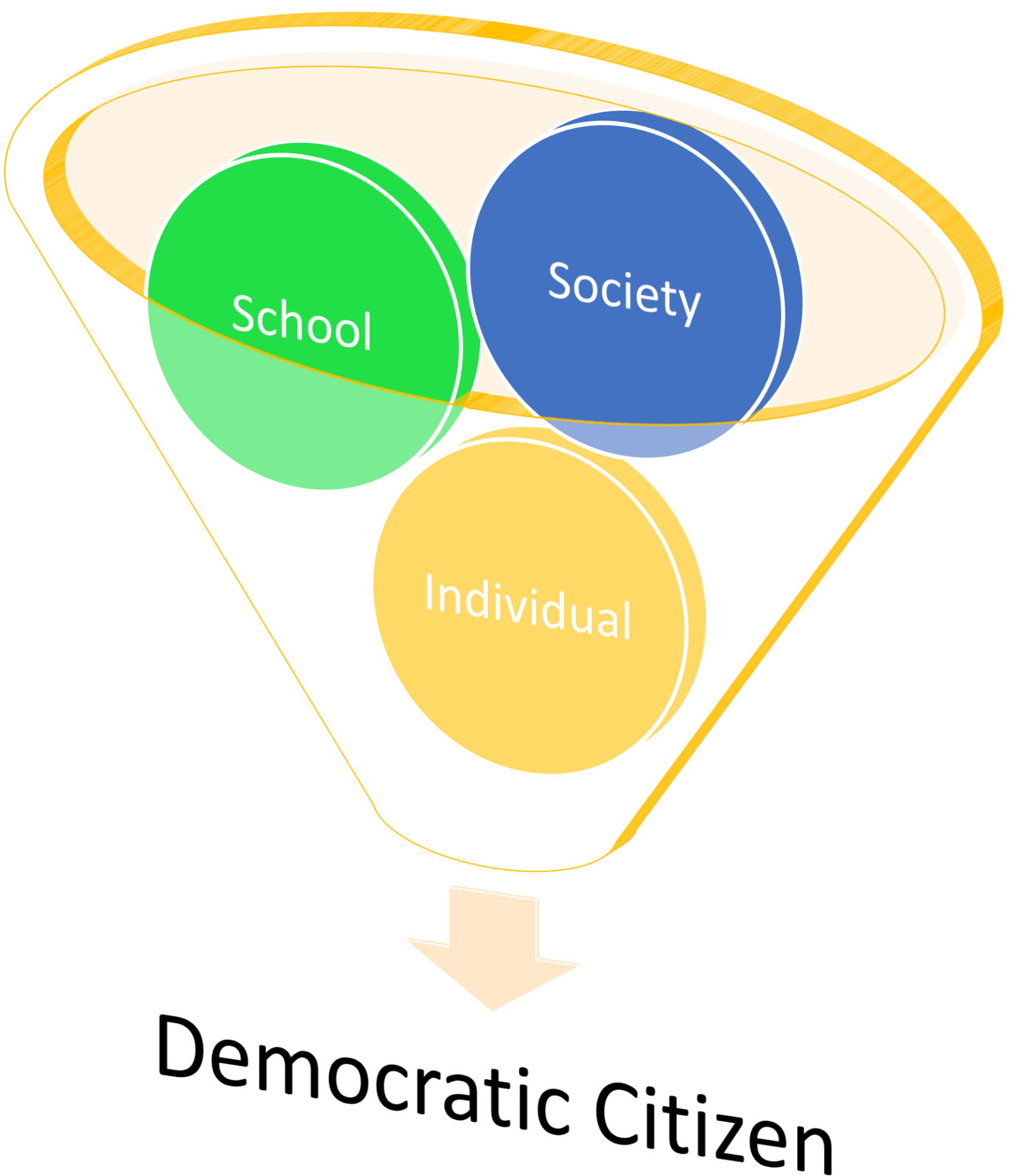
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INTRODUCTION

As education continues to be caught in the snare of high stakes testing, educational purposes tend to hyper-focus on the essential skills reading writing and arithmetic. Thus, a hallmark purpose of education -developing democratic citizenship- is increasingly ignored in the larger discourse of educational purposes and curriculum decisions in schooling (Kahne & Westheimer, 2014). At the same time, socio-political conversations lament the erosion of civility and acts of listening in public spaces (Putnam, 2000; Rawls, 1971). The fundamental values of freedom, justice, and liberty are being (re)defined as political ideologies appear increasingly polarized. Considering the erosion of civic discourse and the delimiting of educational discourse to quantifiable outcomes, one cannot help but wonder if there may be some connection between the two. In quantifiable terms, we might ask: Is there a relationship between the erosion of democratic public discourse and democratic citizenship learning in schools? While such a question may ultimately be unanswerable by quantifiable means, we can –and must– examine the deep connections between schools, society and the individual as they pertain to the promotion and preservation of democratic principles.

PURPOSE

Schools and education have long been established as a locus for inculcating the values of democracy and developing democratic citizens (Carpenter, 2013; Dewey, 1916; Ross, 2014). This aim of education in America was first articulated by Thomas Jefferson, who stated that the primary purpose of education is form democratic citizens. In the early twentieth century, Dewey clearly articulated the vital importance of an educational model focused on growth and stressed the importance of democratic principles in educational spaces. In a (re)consideration of his ideas in the context of the early twenty-first century, **the purpose** of this presentation is to reinvigorate Deweyian educational ideas about the role of democratic practices and ideas in schools and education.



What is the role of schools in developing democratic citizens?

What does it mean to be democratic citizen?

For Dewey (1916), citizenship is ‘the ability to judge men and measures wisely and to take a determining part in making as well as obeying laws’ (p.120). He also warns against too narrow of an understanding of the what it means to be a good citizen, noting that the “social efficiency” of a good citizenry includes the “capacity to share in a give and take of experience” (p.120).

Dewey clearly noted that schools have a special responsibility to education children to their fullest potential. He stated, “Schools require for their full efficiency more opportunity for conjoint activities in which those instructed take part, so that they may acquire a social sense of their own powers and of the materials and appliances used” (p.40). This means, students/children are active participants in their education in connection with their teachers. Such a vision taps into Dewey’s (1916) definition of democracy as a “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p.87). It calls for a thinking body of people. It calls for critical examination. It calls for democracy as a process. For him, education and democracy are inextricably intertwined. Democracy, to survive and thrive requires “deliberate and systematic education. The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact” (p.87). Democracy and strong democratic citizens must be a shared fundamental value undergirding all ideas and conceptualizations surrounding educational aims.

A good citizenry possesses the “capacity to share in a give and take of experience”

What does democratic citizenship education look like?

Democratic citizenship education should stress conscientious, enlightened choice and active, deliberative participation. Being a good citizen in these terms calls for complex, critical thinking. Dewey rightfully asserts “A democratic criterion requires us to develop capacity to the point of competency to choose” (p.119). For example, to be an enlightened and conscientious voter, citizens need to examine the issues, analyze the rhetoric, compare and contrast differing positions, and form an opinion of their own about whom they think is the best candidate.

Dewey also cites the role of education “in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them” (pp.119-120). Schools have a vital role in teaching students to pose and respond to questions, probe reasoning and examine evidence. Student need to be exposed to a full range of ideas, including challenges to the status quo.

Democracy citizenship cannot be taught merely as a product where students are impressed notions of “good citizenship” that rest on solely voting, community service, and individual responsibility. Obedience to law as the defining characteristic of citizenship belies the very heart of what it means to be democratic. As Dewey clearly states, while compliance with the law does have merit, such a view promotes social efficiency, whose aim in education “is to supply precisely what nature fails to secure; namely, habituation of an individual to social control; subordination of natural powers to social rules” (p.118). In other words, mere compliance stands anathema to democracy and democratic principles.

Through Dewey, a model of growth and transformation offers students and educators an alternative perspective on the relationship between citizen and government that engenders a new paradigm of freedom.

CONCLUSIONS

Schools are the first institutions an individual encounters. They serve as more than simply places for knowledge acquisition; schools are a microcosm of culture and society (Cooley, 2011; Heilman, 2011). Their role in shaping future citizens cannot be underestimated or obscured (Cooley, 2011; Noddings, 2008; Parker, 2003). It is incumbent upon us, as a society and citizenry, to continuously (re)consider the role of schooling in educating for democratic citizenship and the influence these institutions have on ALL citizens. This conversation, I argue, needs to be brought back to the forefront of our attention. We can do this in three ways:

- 1) Democracy and what it means to be a democratic citizen ought to be (re)centered in our education aims.
- 2) We must (re)consider school curriculum as the site where students come to know, to consider, and to deliberate.
- 3) Schools, as sites for individual intellectual transformation and growth, ought to (re)focus on acts of knowing and doing as central to individual and social growth.

Dewey’s ideas continue to offer an understanding of education as continuous process with a recursive role in influencing and being influenced by public life and public discourse (McKnight, 2011). Dewey continues to bear relevance as we consider the roles of school, curriculum and individual learning in shaping future citizens.

“The characteristic of the public as a state springs from the fact that all modes of associated behavior may have extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them” (Dewey, 1927, p. 27).

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Education as growth for ALL Conscientious, enlightened choice Active, deliberate participation Complex, Critical thinking Teaching for Democratic Citizenship